

## **“The Bombing of Darwin”**

**Presentation by Noel Phelan**

**Report by David Grundy**

Noel Phelan is a well-known volunteer at the Australian National Maritime Museum who has researched and delivered numerous interesting and detailed presentations which Club Members have enjoyed over the years.



Noel Phelan flanked by JT and David Henry

Noel’s presentation on the bombing of Darwin given at the Squadron on 28 September was incredibly detailed, not only concerning the actual bombing of Darwin, but also regarding the events leading up to this tragic episode in Australia’s history, and the repercussions thereafter.

Noel explained that the United States of America reacted to the Japanese occupation of Indochina by freezing Japanese assets and embargoing oil, whereupon the Japanese faced the choice of either withdrawing from Indochina and possibly China, or seizing the sources of oil production in the Dutch East Indies. They chose the latter and this triggered a series of occupations throughout southeast Asia.

Japan’s war aims were to establish a “new order in East Asia,” built on a “co-prosperity” concept that placed Japan at the centre of an economic bloc consisting of Manchuria, Korea, and North China that would draw on the raw materials of the rich colonies of Southeast Asia. In practice, “East Asia for the Asiatics,” the slogan that headed the campaign, came to mean “East Asia for Japan.”

Noel drew parallels between the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 (which dragged the USA into WWII) and the Bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942. Statistically,

more than double the number of bombs were dropped on Darwin, with Darwin putting up very little resistance due to antiquated communication systems and inferior artillery and planes.

The Japanese chose Darwin as a target because it was an important supply base for ships and airstrips for American craft and planes. The Japanese also realised that they needed the supply base to be neutralised for them to take Timor, which they did soon after.

The Japanese initial reconnaissance of Darwin came from the southeast, and most Darwin residents believed that the aircraft flying above were friendly. A couple of days later, the Japanese launched the first attack comprising 188 planes. These were sighted over Bathurst and Melville Islands but the radioed reports to Darwin were not acted upon with any urgency. Before too long, Japanese aircraft bombed and machine-gunned, sinking eight of the 47 ships in the harbour, including the motor vessel *Neptuna*. Its cargo included 200 depth charges which exploded as the ship lay beside the wharf. Noel drew attention to the fact that the only Naval Destroyer in Darwin Harbour was the USS *Peary* - an old WWI ship whose artillery was used to ship-to-ship combat rather than fighting aircraft. The USS *Peary* was sunk in the initial attack losing 88 crew.

Eighty minutes later, a second wave, this time of land-based bombers from Kendari in the Celebes, arrived to continue the attack. On this occasion, the attack focussed on the RAAF station inland. The raids cost the Japanese no more than 10 aircraft.

The casualties of both civilian and armed services personnel were reported as 243 killed and more than 300 wounded. There were reports of soldiers going AWOL and prisoners from the Darwin Jail being released to assist in the defence of Darwin. All in all, it was a scene of total chaos, with moments of incredible bravery and selflessness shown by many Australians based in Darwin.

The attack on Darwin prompted the then Prime Minister, John Curtin, to communicate to the people of Australia that the country was under imminent danger of invasion, and he encouraged citizens to embrace civil defence. Yet despite encouraging the notion of invasion, the government imposed strict censorship on the details of the attacks, as they felt the public might panic if they knew the truth. This ethos was in stark contrast to the manner in which the United States communicated the bombing of Pearl Harbour to its people.

Prime Minister Curtin described the bombing of Darwin as "The gravest hour of our history". The story was effectively buried, in particular regarding any recognition of the heroic efforts by those on the ground. It wasn't until 1995, 50 years after the end of WWII, that the Government of Australia recognised the bravery of servicemen and women during the attack on Darwin.

Noel presented a fair and factual account of the bombing raids, supported by photos and detailed statistics. In all, it was a stimulating presentation that was well attended by members and their guests.

Many thanks to Noel for his time and knowledge.